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GOPHER PRAIRIE

BY ARCHIBALD MARSHALL

GOPHER PRAIRIE is the little Western town in *Main Street*, the book that has set all America talking. Some people say that *Main Street* is a gross libel on the small American town; others say that it is a true indictment of its smallness. I am inclined to think that the truth lies somewhere between the two opinions, as the truth has a way of doing.

Perhaps if I had read *Main Street* after I had had some opportunity of forming my own judgment, instead of before, the picture it presents would have made a different impression on me. It is a depressing book, and I have no intention of reading it again, but the impression it did leave upon me was one of squalor, and the little towns I have seen in the West are far from being squalid.

The one I know best is situated in country of considerable natural charm, and might be expected to have acquired some charm of its own by this time; for it is not very new, as things go in the West, and though it has prospered it has not greatly increased. It is not entirely without charm. On the outskirts are the residences of its chief inhabitants, none of them large, but most of them attractive in the way of American homes, and surrounded by the open lawns and the beautiful trees which are America's special contribution to the residential idea. In general appearance this gives better results than England's rows of villas, with their little gardens in front, and their bigger gardens behind, of which you see little or nothing from the road. In the residential section of any small town in America, you can pass under the shade of tall trees, with a succession of well-kept lawns on either side of you, and the neat houses, mostly of wood painted white, with their verandas, and flowers about them, standing a little way back. There is more space than in English villa gardens, and nearly all of it is open space, so that when the trees have matured the effect is as if you were passing through a well-kept park. I

don't remember reading of any scene of this sort in the Gopher Prairie of *Main Street*, but it is a distinctive mark of all the little towns I have seen, and to leave it out is not to deal fairly by them.

When you come to the town itself, the effect is far less agreeable, but there is at least one thing that goes to its credit. Main Street is usually very wide. There is a sense of space about it which in some degree takes off from the very poor quality of the buildings which line it on either side. I mean architectural quality. The newer buildings are usually of brick or stone. They are probably adequate in construction, but they are mean in appearance, and the more effort there has been to make them imposing the worse they are. That wonderful spirit in architecture which has put America first among the nations in the practice of this great humanizing art has not yet reached down to the needs of the small town. Here she is still at the bottom of the scale.

The small Western town began years ago with frame buildings of an unusually debased type. There would be a series of one-story wooden buildings with roofs running back from the street, but hidden and disguised by square fronts which made them appear to be of two stories. Everybody knows the pattern of these from pictures, even if they have never seen them. Sometimes an attic window would pierce the middle of this sham front, sometimes it would be used for advertisement purposes, sometimes it would just be left bare. I suppose the idea was to give a more imposing town-like effect, and such early monstrosities might be forgiven if they had been discontinued. But the type is persisted in. I have seen such buildings in course of construction, but instead of the wooden fronts, which may be considered as a kind of hoarding, they were using galvanized iron, shaped and colored to imitate stone. I have seen one that was actually built of stone. It was a bank building, of rough granite blocks, with a pretentious sort of castellated air about it. There was just room for a door and a window, and the upper front was pierced in such a way as to call attention to the fact that there was nothing behind it; so that the sham, which in this instance one might not have suspected, seemed to have been gloried in.

The brick-built stores are usually quite plain, which is something to be thankful for; but they are nothing but great boxes,

with no roof-ridge to be seen, or anything to break their monotony; and sometimes, at a corner, you may see the long upper line sloping a little from the front, so that even the natural squareness of such construction is denied you.

In the town I was in and out of during some days, there was only one commercial building upon which the eye could rest with any pleasure. This belonged to a lumber-yard, and was an honest wooden shed, well-proportioned, with a good roof. I have been told since that this was probably built to the standardized design of one of the big lumber companies, who take a pride in turning out such buildings well. It was probably designed by a good architect, and its lesson, combined with the poor conceptions of building all around it, is that the ordinary sense of right building, which continued well on into the nineteenth century, as can be seen in the small towns of New England, has been lost; and the only way to get it back is through the taste and knowledge of those who have made a study of it. In Gopher Prairie it has never existed, because it died out before that town came into existence, and other ideas took its place. The only thing to hope for is that the taste and knowledge which is so abundantly at work in the centres of American civilization will presently extend over the country. Then the inhabitants of Gopher Prairie, quick to catch new ideas—because they are Americans—will regret the deplorable mistakes they have been making for so long, and will soon arrive at something quite different.

It is a matter of considerable importance. Civic pride is very strong in America. Every little town is in some sort of rivalry with its neighbors. But they leave out almost entirely this question of beauty; or else they do not know in what the beauty of a town consists. I suppose, in the early days, every little town hoped to grow into a big one, which would account for the shams to which they still cling. At the best, you may see a few buildings suitable to a city perking themselves up among the poor little buildings. And it is seldom in a town as much as fifty years old that you will not see some untidy weed-grown "lots" in the very middle of it, that have never been built on. Nothing looks finished. You cannot imagine people who take a pride in their town settling down to it with satisfaction. Yet they do, and point out

to you some very ordinary new garage, or meat-market, as an example of what they can do if they try.

Here and there, in a town rather larger than the ordinary, you may see some attempt at beautifying in the way of a small park, or at least of trees and lawns and flower-beds near the railroad station. And some of the companies that sell gasoline for automobiles have erected attractive-looking kiosks in an outstanding position, to which attention is drawn by a stretch of mown turf with a bed of gay flowers in the middle of it. It is extraordinary how this easy device brightens up a dull-looking town. But trees and lawns and flowers here and there do not suffice. A town is beautiful, or otherwise, because of its buildings, and they continue to erect them in Gopher Prairie with no eye to any sort of beauty, either of the whole or of the part.

I suppose an experienced architect is hardly ever employed, and that the designs, such as they are, are prepared by the builders. In the old days, when good building was a matter of tradition and craftsmanship, this system used to work, and the result was beauty. But it cannot be trusted to work now. Good architects must have their chance if these ugly, stupid little towns are to put off their poverty of outlook and take their place among the good things that America is doing with such vision and energy elsewhere. It must already have dawned upon the inhabitants of most of them that they will never become big towns. But the little towns of the Old World are among the most beautiful of all, and there is no reason why those of the New World should not make themselves so, upon different lines of their own.

There is hardly such a thing as a village in the Middle West. The town, however small, is the unit, and there is nothing to criticize in that, nor in the regularity of the lay-out, which would be something for an architect to work to. A small American town would always be different from a small English town, but it need not be less attractive. There is a charm of newness as well as a charm of age. I wish I could see one of these little Western towns taken in hand by somebody who had the right sort of vision about them. There is no end of opportunity, and if it were done once the example would be followed. It would give the inhabitants something in which they could take a legitimate pride, and

add much to the value of their existence. For it would lead to so many other things for which the ground is already prepared. There is no doubt that good architecture is a high, civilizing influence, and that a community which takes no account of it lags behind in the march of progress.

I have not found the inhabitants of these small towns fairly represented by those of Gopher Prairie in *Main Street*, although some of the more enlightened of them have told me that they themselves do recognize truth in that picture. If they recognize it as true in any respect, its effect upon their future may be beneficial. I think that the chief fault of *Main Street* is that it takes the pettiness of life for granted, and makes you feel that the only possible thing is to escape from it. But that is not how I feel about the reality. Many of the people who live in these towns are of good education, and I have met not a few men of mark in the cities whose early life was spent in one of them. I mean men of culture and character, and not only men who have been successful in business. Those who remain behind are not, as a rule, people of any wide outlook, and perhaps never will be. A small town is a small town, and where it is many hours' journey from the nearest city it is bound to impose a certain narrowness. But the potentialities for a wider outlook than at present obtains are there. People do read—more widely, I think, than the corresponding class in England. They welcome lecturers from the Chautauquas and other organizations which provide them. If these do not carry them very far, the demand for them shows that there is fruitful soil to work upon. The people, generally speaking, are open to ideas: and ideas run fast in America, though there is sometimes an inability to translate them into action which hardly seems to accord with the American character.

The main drawback to the real advance of these comparatively small communities is not their smallness but their belated adhesion to the dollar standard. This has long been given up where civilization has advanced. America is the land of great fortunes, but, as elsewhere, what a man does with his money is more important than the amount of money he has collected or inherited. It does not seem to be so in these small towns. You will often be told what a man is supposed to be "worth", which always

means so many thousand dollars. That this does not represent all, or the best part, of what a man is worth, is one of the ideas that has not penetrated far. One need not quarrel with the phrase, which has its understood meaning, but it is a fact that a man who may have spent his whole life in piling up his dollars, have interested himself in nothing outside the work that has brought them to him, have lived in the same meagre way as if he had been in possession of scarcely any dollars at all, and be looking forward to no change in this respect—that such a man is likely to be respected more than one who has lived the fullest life open to him upon whatever income he may have earned, but without amassing capital.

There is always some genuine interest attached to a man who has been successful in making money, especially if he has done it entirely on his own initiative. He must have seen something of life, and have some power of dealing with it. But it is an interest that soon wears thin, and when everything in the world is brought sooner or later to the standard of dollars and cents it becomes a weight upon the mind. And in a small community there is little to temper the insistence of such talk. The men who practice it have no idea that it is not of supreme interest to everybody with whom they may come in contact, and allow themselves an extreme license in the length of their disquisitions.

There is a great deal of ill-regulated talk in America, even among the highly educated—talk which debars conversation—and there is curiously little effort to cope with it. Among the less sophisticated it often develops into a struggle between several would-be narrators in which the most persistent captures the field for the time being. When he has once captured it—usually with the phrase, “Now, I’ll tell you”—the rule seems to be to give him his head until he has worked himself out, when the next most insistent undertakes to tell you, and does so at the same inordinate length. I ventured once to consult upon this phenomenon a friend who does understand the art of conversation. I said that I had often seen clever men and women sitting in enforced silence while some long-winded talker was holding the field which ought to have been open to everybody. He did not deny the fact, and gave rather an interesting explanation of it. He said that Ameri-

cans were kinder than other people, and suffered bores rather than hurt their feelings.

I like this explanation. It throws a mellow light upon the steam-roller type of talker himself, and fits in with my own observations. I had already found that one method of relieving the boredom of having to sit back and listen to a succession of long diatribes about dollars and cents was to watch for the little gleams of "niceness" that showed up in them, like flowers in a dry desert. I have come across very few money-grubbers among these men whose chief preoccupation is the making of money, and they are generous and even lavish with it when a call is made upon them. They have a name in America for the man who is close with his money. They call him a "tight-wad", but I am bound to say that I have never met an example of one, when there has been any question of whether I or somebody else should pay for something that had to be paid for, and I wanted to be the one to do it. They will not let you, if they are in any sort of host-like relation to you, and they take the widest views of that relationship.

No, the trouble with the smaller men is not that they are ungenerous with their money, but that they do not use it to better their condition—or at least not until they have made so much that they can do so without injuring the important operation of making more out of it. There must be countless people in the small towns of America with incomes of thousands a year whose expenditure is represented by as many hundreds.

Perhaps the man gets all that he wants. He has his business for his chief interest, and has never learned to desire a different sort of life from that at his command. If he has the prospect of making a large fortune, he will spend it like the rest when his time comes, but in the meantime he is satisfied to live in a small way, and is probably happier in doing so than he will be when he has made his pile. He will certainly give his wife and children their full share in his prosperity, and if his wife can also buoy herself up with that hope she may find something to solace her for the lean years enforced upon her. But in the meantime her life is often a hard one, and to my mind a far harder one than ought to be her lot, though she faces it pluckily enough.

The servant problem is difficult, and many of the women do all their own household work and look after their children too, if they have any. The wonder is that they appear on public or semi-public occasions looking so refined and so well-dressed as they do. I suppose the men themselves do a certain amount of the heavier work, and there are many ingenious labor-saving devices. But in spite of everything there seems to be an undue complaisance on the part of those who could often avoid the necessity in seeing their womenfolk turn themselves into household drudges.

It is difficult to make comparison between the Gopher Prairies of America and the small towns of older countries. The apparent absence of caste feeling may be less than it seems. There must be some differences, but they are hardly visible. This is good if it means that no sort of work carries with it a social stigma; but refinement of living is, after all, one of the signs of advancing civilization, and the possession of money is no substitute for it. The tradespeople of a small English town would not mix on terms of social equality with those of the professional or "leisured" classes, nor with those of the working classes, though each class would have many points of contact with the others.

In Gopher Prairie the classes run into one another, and the store-keepers are at least as good as anybody, but their standard of living is not higher than that of a well-to-do English tradesman. Nor, perhaps, are many of them better educated; in knowledge of the world they are less so, because their contacts with it are less varied.

Yet there is a difference, to the advantage of the Americans, which can be felt, though with difficulty defined. I think it lies more in what one feels they might become than in what they have actually done with their opportunities. In America it is so much a matter of looking forward, and one gets into the habit of doing so, especially in the more recent settlements. There is hope and expectation everywhere, and progress is so marked, if one casts back.

But what is progress? Has Gopher Prairie made none because at its beginnings it expected great things and has achieved only small ones? I think it has made much progress if, with little more than the population it had a generation ago, it has stabilized

itself and enjoyed prosperity within its borders. If it will never become a great city, it has it well within its own grasp to become a pleasant and inviting country town, which would provide a life more attractive to many than the life of a city. The fact that people do elect to live in and about small country towns everywhere in Europe, and in the older parts of America, but that scarcely anybody would choose to live in Gopher Prairie unless his work tied him to it, is the strongest indictment that can be brought against it.

But little time lies behind it since its foundation, and much time lies ahead. In another generation the reproach may be entirely removed.

ARCHIBALD MARSHALL.